

THE PLAYS OF WINSTON GRAHAM

His remains lie in the churchyard of St Margaret the Queen, Buxted and, on the headstone that marks the site of his grave are inscribed name and epitaph:

WINSTON GRAHAM
NOVELIST AND PLAYWRIGHT



And it's probably true that young WG was a produced playwright before he became a published novelist. Nonetheless, that spare summation of the late author's professional life puts a surprising and somewhat fanciful spin on the facts: just three plays penned in a seventy year writing career, only two of which were produced, only one of which was professionally produced and none of which were

published¹ – all in stark contrast to his prodigal and latterly hugely successful achievements as a contemporary and historical novelist. Indeed, he is sure to be remembered for his books for as long as books are read. But, were there no books such that his reputation was required to survive solely on his output as a playwright, the fading into obscurity of his name would not be an issue, for it would be a name not made or known in the first place. Who chose the headstone's words – or why – is not clear. But let us now consider in turn the three works that, between them, serve to validate, just barely, WG's "playwright" status:

(1) SEVEN SUSPECTED – A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

WRITING

WG left an account of the genesis of this, his first play, in *Memoirs*² (see Book One, Chapter Three), confirming that he took the project on at the suggestion of someone who had noted his ability to improve the dialogue of Am Dram productions in which he performed. Written in six weeks, it was staged "for three nights ... at the local cinema" and well received. But, as to *when* it was written, WG is characteristically vague. Profits from the production went to benefit the unemployed, *Memoirs* tells us – but fundraising efforts on their behalf seem to have been made regularly in the period 1930-36, which is of no help in pinning down when precisely *Seven Suspected* was scripted. In the programme of 1978's *Shadow Play* (see below), a short author bio, featuring data clearly provided by either WG or one of his team, states that "he [WG] wrote a play [*Seven Suspected*] **when he was 21**". If that statement is taken at face value, it would place the writing of the play in the year July 1929 to June 1930. But WG often claimed, when asked, that he was born in 1910 rather than 1908 (note what his gravestone, above, has to say on the matter) which would make the relevant year July 1931 to June 1932. Then again, when interviewed late in 1977, he said, with reference to his early days:

*All I wanted to do was to write a novel and to get it published and to go from there. About that time I wrote a play... but **immediately after that my first novel was published** ...³*

This suggests (as does the play's performance in Hayle in 1936 – see below) that *Seven Suspected* was probably written in **the spring or summer of 1934**, i.e. in the weeks or months before publication in October 1934 of *The House With The Stained Glass Windows*.

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

Mrs Entwistle
Margery Entwistle
Valerie Drayton
Herr Frederick Kragen
Mrs Farrow
Dr James Dale
Pierre
Miss Violet Ormsby
Arthur Drayton

SCENE

"The Grey Chalet" – a private hotel three miles from Zermatt, Switzerland. September.

ACT ONE

The public lounge of above. Time: 7 pm.

Act One serves to introduce us to the characters of the play. We discover that the hotel is owned and run by Arthur Drayton with the help of his daughter Valerie. Among the guests are Mrs Entwistle, an imperious, sharp-tongued dowager and her niece companion Margery, a mousy, put-upon chit of a girl. Herr Kragen is "a foreigner of something over 30" and Mrs Farrow a woman of the world, "awfully nice", just arrived from Madeira where she habitually goes to sit out her divorces (this latest her third). Dr Dale is engaged to Val, who is a bit ditzzy, Miss Violet Ormsby is a soulful poetess and the hotel butler is Pierre, rendered mute by a war wound, which sets up a couple of easy jokes about the "dumb waiter".

When Herr Kragen and Mrs Farrow are introduced as strangers they show signs of previous acquaintance. She then mildly needles him, first forgetting his name then calling him "Herr Jargon". Margery, Val, Mrs Farrow and Mrs Entwistle settle to play bridge but unfortunately Val is unfamiliar with "Contract Bridge". However, Miss Ormsby the poetess knows the game – perhaps she'll play when she comes in. Pierre the butler enters with three letters, followed by Miss Ormsby, who begins to

declaim poetry to a polite though reluctant Herr K. Mine host Arthur Drayton enters: two of the three letters are for him and the second is clearly "bad news". Visibly shaken, he's escorted off by his daughter Val to get some air. The bridge game fizzles out. Some amusingly acid exchanges between Mrs Entwistle and Mrs Farrow precede all others exiting to leave Herr K and Mrs F alone. We now learn that he was the first of her three husbands. They exit and Arthur Drayton returns. Alone on stage, he goes to his safe, opens it and reaches in to take out an envelope. A gloved hand holding a gun appears through the lounge door and shoots him. He is able to throw the envelope back inside the safe and lock the door with a muttered "Haven't got it yet!" before collapsing to the floor.

ACT TWO

As before, five days later.

The curtain rises to reveal seven seated across the stage as follows:

	Dr Dale	
Valerie		Mrs Farrow
Mrs Entwistle		Miss Ormsby
Margery		Herr Kragen

We learn from Dr Dale that Drayton, who had a weak heart, was "shot and wounded" but died two days later. Police or other medical assistance had not been sought at the dead man's request. We learn, too, that, on the day before his death, Drayton made a new will, with a special "Clause Two" stating that whoever discovers the identity of his mystery assailant will get Drayton's "formula for the production of synthetic ambergris". We learn that Drayton and a colleague named Robert Sexton had sponsored an analytical chemist called Wood to synthesise artificial ambergris, which, when sold to perfumiers, would stand to make all three of them very rich. But Wood absconded with the formula, Sexton shot him dead and Drayton, wanting no part in murder, turned Sexton in to the police. Sexton received a ten year jail sentence and the letter bearing "bad news" had informed Drayton that Sexton was now back out and had asked "Is the formula safe?" Mrs Entwistle: *You don't mean to insinuate that one of us is Sexton?* Yes – he may be using a front or even be disguised as a woman. No one is above suspicion: thus "seven suspected".

Enter Pierre, in a state of agitation. He writes a note: *I have committed a great sin. The master* – at which point Dr Dale stops him. Mrs E announces that the note clearly implicates Pierre, so, as the first to denounce him, she claims the formula. All exit except Herr K, who twiddles with the safe door. It opens. He extracts papers. Dr Dale enters with a gun and takes back from Herr K and replaces the formula. Dale examines the safe door. The tumblers have jammed so it opens easily. Dale fixes the lock. Herr K reveals that he came to the hotel to offer to buy the formula from Drayton on behalf of the perfumery firm he works for in Leipzig. Dale agrees to take steps to check his story in the morning. Margery enters and Herr K asks her to walk with him "as far as the pines and back". Though reluctant, because dutiful, she exits then returns with her coat on. They leave together while, off stage, Mrs Entwistle yells *Margery! MARGERY! M A R G E R Y !!*

ACT THREE

Same scene, 10 pm the following evening.

We learn that Pierre has gone; Dale says to visit his sick grandmother; Mrs E thinks he's been "done away with". She says she saw Dale carrying a sack down into the cellars and though it couldn't have contained a dead body, it might have contained parts of one. Dale and Val give her a key and send her off to search the cellars. We learn that Dale and Val are in cahoots about Pierre, though not criminally. They exit and, with the house lights having (in)conveniently fused, Mrs Farrow walks onto and gropes her way around a dark stage, looking for her bag by striking matches. Her third one shockingly illuminates the dead face of Arthur Drayton. She screams and exits. With fuse mended and lighting restored, others come back on. There is no body to be seen. Five sit down as follows:

	Dr Dale	Valerie	
Miss Ormsby		Mrs Farrow	Herr Kragen

Margery enters, newly confident, groomed and radiant; ugly duckling turned swan. She reveals that Herr K proposed to her and she accepted. Mrs E, outraged, very "Lady Bracknell", forbids it. All leave except Dr Dale and Miss Ormsby. She asks him to lock the room, which he does. She says "I know who shot Arthur Drayton – I did." She then pulls a gun on him, ties him to a chair, finds the safe combination in his pocket, reveals that she's Robert Sexton's loving sister and that Sexton died in

prison. Dale discloses that the formula is not worth much since the artificial ambergris lacks some of the essential properties of the natural product. Val and Mrs Farrow see through the keyhole that Miss O is rifling the safe, find a spare key and enter the lounge. She covers them, finds the formula and is about to leave when the supposedly dead Arthur Drayton walks in. He reveals that his "death" was a trap to expose the writer of the letter and that for the past few days he's been hiding in the extensive cellar network beneath the hotel. When Mrs F saw him in the dark, he'd been caught coming to fetch some food for himself, since, with Pierre gone to his grandmother's, there was no one to look after his needs. The company agree that they will probably hush the matter up and let "Miss Ormsby" off. Val hands Mrs E a note from Margery – a copy of her marriage certificate, issued in Zermatt that morning. She, we're told, has just ridden off in the hotel's one pony and trap with her new husband Herr K. Mrs E wishes to give chase, but the only other conveyance on the premises is Pierre's bicycle ...

PRODUCTIONS

After its three-night debut in Perranporth's Women's Institute Hall (dates unknown, circa 1934), the play went on to be produced by amateur companies "in Truro, Camborne, Hayle, Bury, Hendon and elsewhere" and the date of one of these productions can be verified from a contemporary review in *The Cornishman* of 2 April 1936, which refers to a Hayle Players performance of the play on the previous Thursday i.e. 26 March 1936. No other data available.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

WG reports that each of the initial Perranporth performances was attended by "a full and appreciative house"; also that other productions "always [met] with great success". *The Cornishman* review of the Hayle Players production (which was attended by WG, who afterwards thanked the cast for "a worthy performance") recalls an evening "packed with drama (with) an attractive leavening of humour"⁴: encouragement indeed for a tyro still seeking his way. And the play, while standard murder mystery / drawing room fare, is indeed fun to read.

Next page: these two undated typescripts, preserved in RIC's Graham Archive⁵, comprise the lifetime achievement of "playwright" WG

PLAY
CIRCUMSTANTIAL
EVIDENCE
Typescript

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

PLAY
SEVEN SUSPECTED



(2) FORSAKING ALL OTHERS

WRITING

WG states in *Memoirs* that *Forsaking All Others* was written "around the time of [my] sixth novel" i.e. circa 1938. The RIC archive holds no manuscript copy of the play, which was never produced, and it is unlikely that any exists, since WG (who didn't even retain manuscript copies of the first four *Poldark* novels) came to think very poorly of it: *not nearly as good as Seven Suspected, he wrote, more self-conscious, more pretentious ... full of second thoughts ... trying to go deeper and, on the whole, failing.* He eventually reworked the play into his eighth novel *Strangers Meeting* which he dismisses in *Memoirs*, perhaps because of its unfortunate lineage, but unfairly nonetheless, as "the worst novel I ever wrote".

The novel comprises three books of unequal length, reflecting, no doubt, the three act structure of the source play. For the purposes of this article, I assume that the plots of play and novel are the same.

PLOT (*ex STRANGERS MEETING*)

BOOK ONE (three chapters, 46 pages)

In South Africa, 36 year old expat farmer Gerald Tollis meets and courts 20 year old expat Susan Grey. In Stoke, factory worker Sheila Thompson (22) wonders whether to accept an invitation from her employer William Fawcett (about 45) to go away on holiday with him. In Norfolk, the Herridge family, father John (40), mother Helen (36) and their two young sons, enjoy a Sunday breakfast. We learn that Susan Grey – now engaged to Tollis – is Helen's half-sister and that, when John married Helen eleven years previously, she was a forlorn young widow whose tea-planter first husband of two years, Harvey, had died in India.

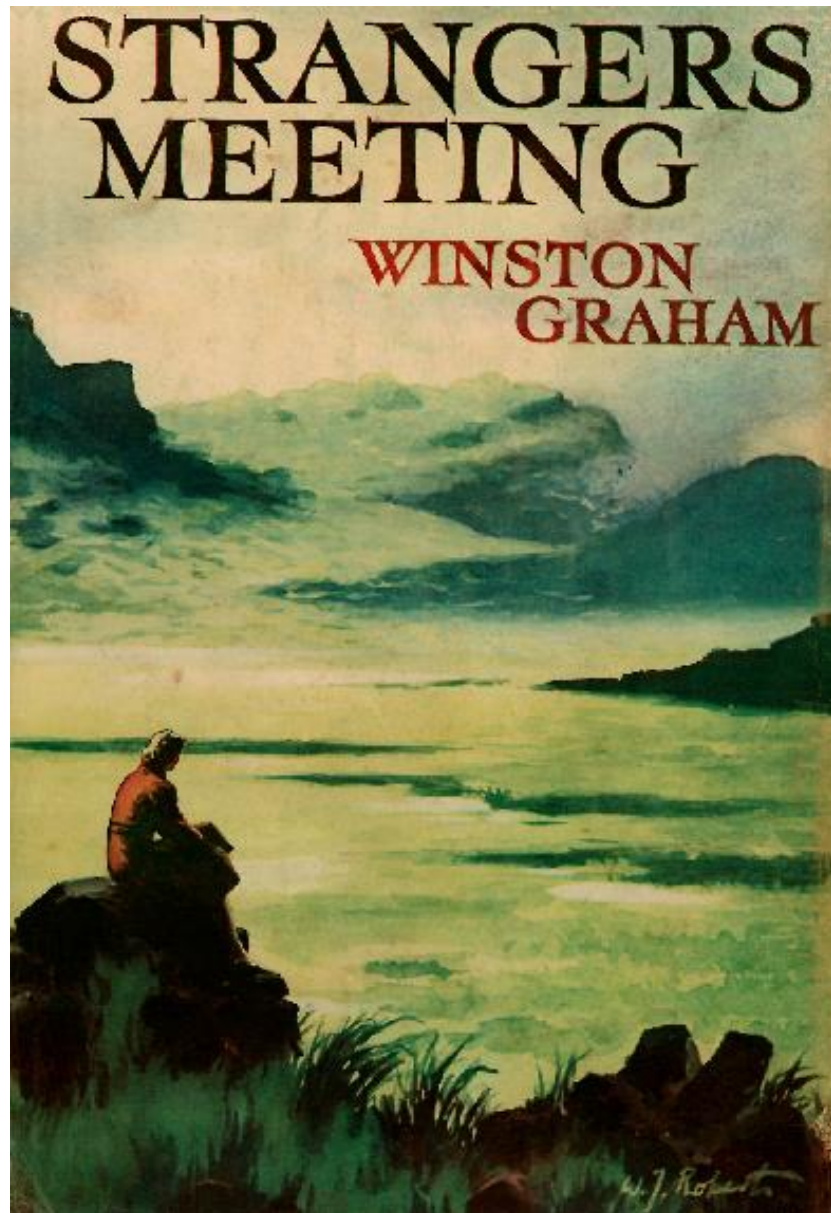
BOOK TWO (twenty chapters, 197 pages)

The action moves to and hereafter remains in Trembeth, a remote west Cornwall fishing village, population 83. At Mrs Spargo's Guest House, long-term resident Peter Crane (late twenties, quasi-consumptive, poet) is joined by Mr and Mrs Herridge, Sheila Thompson and William Fawcett (posing as Mr and Mrs Fawcett)

and Gerald Tollis and Susan Grey. Crane becomes attracted to Sheila, who soon tells him she's not married to Fawcett. At first sight, through a window, of Tollis, Helen has a fainting fit. She suggests to her husband that he's probably the same sort of bad lot her first husband Harvey was, but then unaccountably begins to spend time with him. Fawcett reports seeing them together in the sandhills, which they both deny. Sheila tells Fawcett she won't be returning to Stoke with him. We learn that Tollis has previously travelled "in Rhodesia, Ceylon and Mysore". An uncharacteristic coolness grows between Helen and Susan. Tollis, driven to his bed by a touch of malaria, doses himself with quinine and whisky to throw it off, then, in the King's Head with Crane, reveals cynical, worldly and abrasive sides to his nature previously undisclosed. Sheila asks Mrs Spargo where locally "a friend of hers" might hope to find a job. Mrs S overhears Tollis propositioning a woman – not Susan – who turns him down. Later that evening, Fawcett overhears Tollis and Susan arguing upstairs, Crane sets off to the village to post a letter, Tollis strides off to an undisclosed location and Helen goes out to get some air and then call on casual acquaintance Mr Penrose, leaving John, Susan, Sheila and Fawcett behind, each in a separate room (and thus with no alibi) at the Guest House. Crane, returning via the quarry path from the King's Head, where he'd had a drink with Penrose, stumbles on a prostrate body.

BOOK THREE (seven chapters, 64 pages)

At the inquest at Trembeth School upon the body of Gerald Arthur Tollis, we learn that Tollis had lived for three or four minutes after Crane found him, managing to say just one word – "Susan" – before he died; also that a derelict hut close to the point where Tollis fell from the lip of the quarry showed signs of recent use, as for an assignation. Back at the Guest House, Sheila declines to return to Stoke with Fawcett. He asks her to marry him. She refuses and he leaves alone. Mrs Spargo recounts to Sheila the bitter argument she overheard that morning between half-sisters Helen and Susan. Crane, walking back from the inquest (verdict: death by misadventure), reveals that, before dying, Tollis had actually said "Helen", not "Susan", also some "queer stuff" – evidence he had chosen "in common decency" to suppress. He meets Sheila and rejects her overtures. The two part unhappily. We learn that Helen and Tollis have a past (though, unsatisfactorily, nothing more about it either here or later) and that, in the past week, he'd been attempting to blackmail her "not for money". Crane and Sheila meet fortuitously in the woods and are reconciled. Crane sees the Herridges off and, in parting from John, returns to him the jacket button he'd found clutched in the dead Tollis's hand.



Strangers Meeting, Ward Lock, 1939: WG's eighth novel, a reworking of his second play, *Forsaking All Others*, is not as bad as he claims.

PRODUCTIONS

None, either amateur or professional.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

N/A

(3) SHADOW PLAY / CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE / INDIZIENBEWEIS

WRITING

WG's third play was written, presumably during the mid-1970s, with the working title of *Strangers Will Now Withdraw*⁵ before making its stage debut as *Shadow Play* at Salisbury Playhouse in the autumn of 1978. It then disappeared for seven months before eventually resurfacing under the revised title *Circumstantial Evidence* at Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, where it ran for three weeks with further single weeks at Richmond and Brighton to follow.

No further UK production appears to have been mounted since that time and the play is wholly ignored in *Memoirs*, perhaps indicating that its author was not wholly satisfied with either iteration of his work, even though contemporary reviews were – see below – for the most part, warmly complimentary.

It would be interesting to know to what extent the play was revised between its first and second productions. But though the RIC archive holds a manuscript of *Circumstantial Evidence*, there is none of *Shadow Play* with which to compare. However, the cast of characters as presented to the audiences in 1978 and 1979 confirm that minor changes, at least, were made:

CAST

(i) *Shadow Play* (1978)

Raymond Palmer
Mary Volgis
Lord Scarton
Peter Thomas
Clerk of the Court
April Durgan
Maurice Durgan
Vivien Palmer
Arthur Matthews
Dudley Robinson
John Digby, President's Adviser
A Doctor
Other Members of the Committee
and Staff

(ii) *Circumstantial Evidence* (1979)

Raymond Palmer M.D., B.Ch.
Mary Volgis
Lord Scarton M.V.O., F.R.C.P.
Vivien Palmer
Peter Thomas
Arthur Matthews
Clerk to the Committee
Stenographer
Doctors (2)
April Durgan
Maurice Durgan
Dudley Robinson

PROGRAMME NOTE

The Disciplinary Committee of the General Medical Council of Great Britain meets twice yearly to consider cases of alleged professional misconduct.*

These cases can range from Disregard of personal responsibility to patients, to Misuse of drugs, or Abuse of professional position to commit adultery.

The Committee consists of a president, a qualified legal adviser, and a number of medical and lay members, who hear the cases and pass judgement.

If a doctor is struck off the register, he ceases to be entitled to practise.

The procedure of the Committee is closely akin to a court of law, but the Committee and its president act as both judge and jury.

Winston Graham

* Revised in the *Circumstantial Evidence* Programme Note to "two or three times a year". No other changes.

THE NAME OF THE PLAY

When it comes to selling tickets, *Circumstantial Evidence* sounds like a rather better prospect than *Shadow Play*, since the first title gives some idea of what the play is likely to be about, whereas the other does not. But when you read WG's conception of how the play was to be staged, you realise why he made his initial choice and, marketing difficulties notwithstanding, how apt it was.

He envisions the scene as

*a large room with a judicial-like bench with three chairs behind. The centre chair is a high-backed, ornate armchair. There is a witness stand, tables for legal representatives etc ... **Mainly by lighting** but*

occasionally by the movement of a piece of furniture this set is made to do for four other rooms ... It is essential that each act is played as a continuing whole ... A longish hexagonal table centre front can serve for all sorts of purposes ...

Thus the play unfolds with discrete parts of the stage serially illuminated to create intimate and individual spaces in which the actors relate their tale – whence *shadow play*. The problem is, of course, that you'd only come to understand this after the event, which is presumably why a less subtle but more commercially viable alternative title was chosen instead.



Shadow Play, Salisbury Playhouse, 1978

ACT ONE

- - - The day before the hearing begins - - -

Dr Palmer and Mary Volgis, his defence counsel, are in a room. She is holding a sheaf of press cuttings re the inquest of April Durgan, a former patient of Palmer's. She reads: "Husband accuses doctor of murder ..."

- - - They take their places in court as others enter and take their places. All rise as Lord Scarton enters. The charge is read: the adultery of Dr Palmer and Mrs Durgan. He pleads Not Guilty - - -

We learn that Dr Palmer and his wife Vivien became friendly with Mr and Mrs Durgan and began exchanging social visits. On one occasion, neither Mrs Palmer nor Mr Durgan could keep a pre-arranged date, so Dr Palmer and April Durgan dined out together alone.

- - - In the restaurant - - -

The pair – she is a strikingly attractive, vivacious and alluring woman, he a handsome professional man – become increasingly chummy. We learn that she moved with her parents from her native Bolivia to London but then, on their return home, stayed to earn her living as a club singer, albeit an indifferent one. She married a husband for whom she no longer cares; the two have a "sex-hate" relationship. He slights her as a *ladino* (meaning "half-breed"). Though she tries to lead the doctor on, he resists her increasingly obvious blandishments. Seduction, it seems, is not for him.

- - - Back to the courtroom - - -

Mr Durgan gives evidence about the start of his suspicion that his wife might be having an affair. He goes to see Dr Palmer, who reassures him. Then a neighbour complains about a green Volvo that's always being left in the way whenever Durgan is away from home ... and Dr Palmer has a green Volvo (though so, too, does Lord Scarton). We learn that April Durgan committed suicide and with an intemperate outburst Durgan blames Palmer for causing her death. Lord Scarton admonishes the distraught witness, who is on the verge of tears.

- - - To Dr and Vivien Palmer with Mary Volgis (counsel) and Arthur Matthews (solicitor), Palmer's defence team - - -

Mrs Palmer expresses reservations about Mary Volgis having to work closely with her husband. Can they be trusted together?

- - - To Volgis and prosecuting counsel Peter Thomas - - -

We learn that Dr Palmer lost his only son (to a first wife) in "a street accident" and that he's considered a good doctor.

- - - Back to Durgan's evidence - - -

We learn that Durgan was obliged to travel to Stockholm on business and asked Dudley Robinson, a neighbour, to watch his flat during his absence. We learn that after Robinson reports two visits from Dr Palmer, Mr and Mrs Durgan quarrel bitterly, after which he insists he is leaving her. He then slams out of their home and goes off drinking. Having changed his mind about leaving, he returns home at midnight and gets into his bed, adjoining his wife's, thinking her asleep. He wakes at seven the next morning to find her dead. He calls Robinson, Dr Palmer and the police. He claims that, very soon after his arrival, Dr Palmer admitted to him the love affair between himself and April.

- - - Cross-examination of Durgan by Volgis - - -

Volgis suggests that Dr Palmer tried to help Durgan during their consultations, that Durgan had always been jealous of his wife and that he was making up the doctor's "admission" of an affair between himself and Mrs Durgan.

- - - Dudley Robinson (neighbour) giving evidence - - -

Confirms Palmer's visits during Durgan's absence in Stockholm, also the bitter row between the Durgans on Mr Durgan's return, then Durgan leaving home in a rage and then *a further visit, in Durgan's absence, from Dr Palmer.*

- - - April Durgan and Dr Palmer, at her home - - -

She urges him to go with her to Bolivia to start a new life together. He advises her to go to bed and take a couple of sleeping pills. She then tells him she's admitted

to her husband her affair with him. He gives her three pills and persuades her to try and get some sleep. They can talk more in the morning.

- - - Dr and Mrs Palmer, at home - - -

They row about his affairs, though at least "you've kept off patients until now, thank God." He tells his wife that he wants to stay with her and their two children.

- - - Volgis cross-exam of Robinson - - -

An important discrepancy of evidence: Robinson states that he distinctly heard Durgan (or someone he assumed was Durgan) return home at 10.30 pm, and not at midnight as Durgan claimed.

- - - Durgan and Robinson, in Durgan's home on the morning of his
wife's death - - -

Durgan is in a state. Robinson reminisces about his own wife's death. Dr Palmer arrives, goes into the bedroom and comes out with an almost empty phial of pills. He sends Robinson to the kitchen to make coffee. Durgan and Palmer argue. Durgan accuses him of killing his wife to stop her making trouble for him.

- - - Palmer and Volgis at the end of the first day - - -

"Did you commit murder?"

"All doctors do."

- - - Palmer and wife - - -

He (quoting from a clipping): "Husband accuses doctor of murder."

"It was only a headline."

"The tip of the iceberg."

"Is that how you see it?"

"Isn't that what it is?"

ACT TWO

- - - Dr Palmer in the box, Volgis examining - - -

Palmer says he was offering Mrs Durgan "counselling" by way of treatment and, when pressed, acknowledges that this was "unwise" but no more. We learn that he's in a single (one-man) practice with 3,000 NHS and 400 private patients which, together with his hospital duties, means he usually works a twelve hour day. He considers Mr Durgan "unbalanced" and denies having admitted to him any form of improper relationship with his wife.

- - - Mary Volgis and Vivien Palmer in a pub - - -

We learn that Mary Volgis's father was a surgeon; also that Dr Palmer's interest in children's medicine increased after his first child was killed at the age of thirteen in a hit-and-run accident. Volgis asks if Mrs Palmer ever met her husband's first wife and Vivien confirms that she did. Did Vivien like Mrs Durgan? Yes, at first, but then she realised that April's brightness was false. Did her husband's attraction to other women concern Mrs Palmer? Well, he had a "pretty little actress" three years ago; it lasted "all one winter – but she wasn't a patient." Vivien then asks: "Do you think him guilty and would it make a difference if you did?" "No – I carry out my solicitor's instructions. The court is there to judge, not me." "Even if guilty, how do you weigh that bad against all the good he does?" "If guilty, he will be struck off to defend the basis of trust on which doctors attend women patients." Mrs Palmer asks whether standards have been relaxed in recent years. Mary Volgis says they have to some degree, for example, if cited in a divorce case, there would be no comeback unless the doctor could be shown to have "abused his position of trust" – which is what Durgan is accusing him of here.

- - - Dr Palmer in the box with Peter Thomas cross-examining - - -

Dr Palmer visited April Durgan on the evening of the 25th, found her "upset" and stayed half an hour. During that time, he gave her two sleeping pills and put her to bed. "Didn't it occur to you to take away the rest of her sleeping pills?" No, because he didn't consider her the suicidal type. Thomas asks whether she did it (i.e. killed herself) for Palmer's sake, but, after an objection, the question is withdrawn. Was the doctor's statement "It's all over now" the sort a professional man would

address to a bereaved husband? No, but Dr Palmer was merely trying to bring him to his senses. When Robinson went to make coffee, Palmer was able to direct him to where in the kitchen the coffee jar was kept. How did he know? Because he'd made a cup for Mrs Durgan the previous evening.

- - - Dr Palmer on the phone at his home. Evening, two days later - - -

He talks with a colleague about a case. We establish that it is now Sunday evening and that the hearing is expected to conclude tomorrow. Dr Palmer agrees to come to the hospital to attend a patient.

- - - Volgis and Vivien Palmer, same place; Dr Palmer now out - - -

Volgis states that she cannot continue to act in the case. She says that while Vivien was worried that she, Volgis, might become emotionally involved while working with her husband, she has become, rather, *morally* involved. She began to read back and the more she read, the more afraid she became, since nothing was what it seemed, with the GMC trial a sort of shadow play. Why? *Because the real questions haven't been put.* Suppose all the accusations were true. It would be quite a strong motive, wouldn't it?

"For what?"

"Murder."

Volgis acknowledges that Palmer could not have injected Mrs Durgan, or the puncture mark would have been reported at the inquest. But he could have got the rest of the tablets into her stomach by artificial means. The neighbour Robinson heard someone go into the Durgans at 10.30. "Did your husband go out again that night?" Mrs Palmer concedes that he did. Referring to the phone call made to Dr Palmer by Mr Durgan immediately after he found his wife apparently dead in her bed, Volgis states that Palmer told Durgan that April's "life had been thrown away" *before he was told she was dead.* This is dismissed as more lies from Durgan. As Mrs Palmer berates Volgis, Dr Palmer enters quietly, unobserved. Volgis tells Vivien that Palmer's first wife Rosalind died whilst they were holidaying in Kenya. She committed suicide. She was a Catholic, for whom suicide is a cardinal sin. She died of the same pills, given at the same dosage, in just the same way as Mrs Durgan. Palmer discloses his presence. "It's true, of course. But did you know my first wife was a *lapsed* Catholic? She also took to drink." Volgis says that she received confirmation from the authorities in Nairobi yesterday that Rosalind had throat

bruises to indicate that she had been stomach-tubed. Palmer asks whether April's throat showed similar signs and Volgis confirms that it did not. Palmer then outlines in meticulous detail how a murder done this way could be made to look like suicide by someone with sufficient medical knowledge. His account is so specific that it is tantamount to a confession of the murder by himself of his first wife – someone who had gone to pieces after the death of her child such that the ending of her life could be seen as a merciful release. But he then goes on to say that it's all a coincidence; that what he described is what *might* have happened; but that in fact both deaths were suicides. When his first wife died, he was 100 miles away visiting a National Park with two friends. Her apparent throat bruising could be readily explained by post mortem change induced by heat. During the crucial period ref April Durgan, he was operating at the hospital in front of five witnesses; facts all easily verifiable.

- - - Back at the GMC hearing - - -

Volgis gives her closing speech, the Committee deliberates briefly and the case is dismissed.

- - - Volgis and Vivien Palmer - - -

Volgis learns that, before her marriage, Vivien was a "research pathologist". She also establishes that Vivien was in Mombasa when the first Mrs Palmer met her death there.

- - - Dr Palmer and Mary Volgis - - -

It is clear that Dr Palmer and Volgis both now see that Vivien Palmer is a double murders, "but civilisation forgives a lot if one can hide it. You'll help me hide it, Mary Volgis, won't you?"

PRODUCTIONS

(i) as *Shadow Play* at Salisbury Playhouse from 19 October to 11 November 1978.

(ii) as *Circumstantial Evidence* at Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford from 19 June to 7 July 1979, at Richmond Theatre, Richmond upon Thames from 23 to 28 July 1979 and at the Theatre Royal, Brighton from 30 July to 4 August 1979.

(iii) as *Indizienbeweis* (a translation of *Circumstantial Evidence* into German by Else Marie Nybo) by Landesbühne, Hannover from 31 December 1998 (number of performances unknown) and at das Theater an der Marschnerstrasse, Hamburg from 28 to 31 October 2004.



Shadow Play, Salisbury Playhouse, 1978: Gilbert Wynne as Dr Palmer and Muriel Odunton as April Durgan

CRITICAL RECEPTION

(i) *Shadow Play*

A big success

R. M. Williams, *The Stage and Television Today*, 26 October 1978

[Shadow Play] is drawing the crowds, whose attention is absolutely riveted by what goes on, so much so that they watch in silence, only to show their enthusiastic pleasure by their applause at the end of the first act and at the conclusion after they have had a big surprise sprung on them ... This play ... topical and played with great authenticity ... is just what the doctor ordered.

R.M.W., *Salisbury Journal*, 27 October 1978

Winston Graham ... has written an intensely absorbing modern mystery ... which is enthralling and intriguing near-capacity audiences The conclusion is surprisingly satisfactory.

L.I.F., *Salisbury Journal*, 27 October 1978

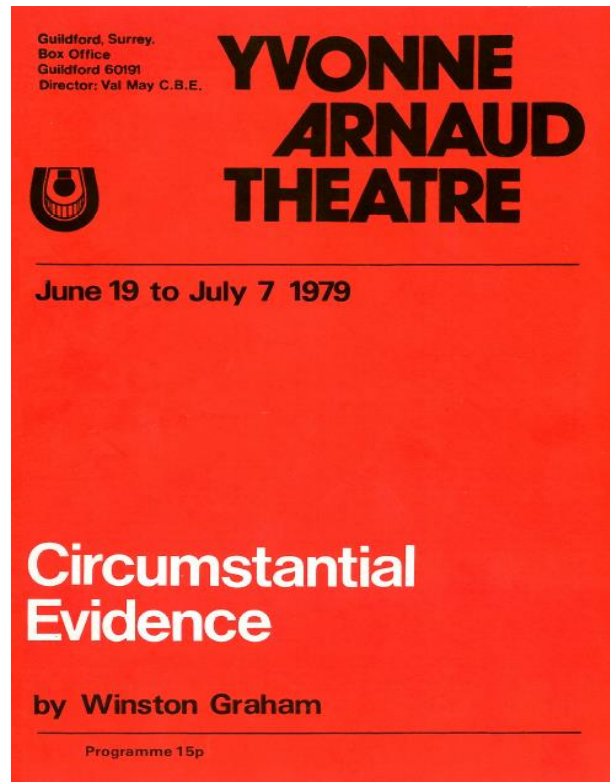
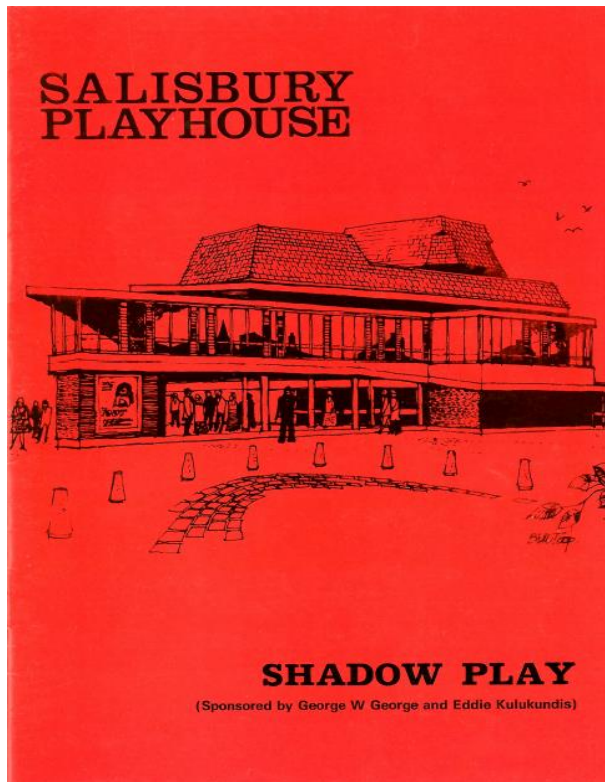
(ii) *Circumstantial Evidence*

Ethical reflections, murder techniques and motives are briskly treated ... in this mystery thriller, novelist Winston Graham's first [sic] stage play. The plot, though sometimes contrived, is taut and fast moving. The production is replete with tele-stars animating, for the most part, two-dimensional characters and the set (Crown Court out of Star Trek) is effective.

Unsigned, *Bare Facts* #358, 22 June 1979

Circumstantial Evidence is ... an unconvincing story convincingly told ... [Director] Val May swings the action about in a determined effort to keep us enthralled. He succeeds, but in a purely mechanical manner, with the aid of the now obligatory double or triple twists.

John Frayn Turner, *The Stage and Television Today*, 5 July 1979



Programmes: (1) *Shadow Play*, 1978 (2) *Circumstantial Evidence*, 1979 (3) and (4) *Indizienbeweis*, Hannover 1998 and Hamburg, 2004

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Young WG opened his playwright's account with an uninhibited, straightforward, no-nonsense whodunnit, unsubtle but effective, in the style of Agatha Christie and probably ideally suited to those few amateur companies whose chose to put it on. Then, older and better versed, he looked to add depth and dimension to the characters of his next play; to make them more than mere ciphers moved by rote about the stage, through their puppet paces, only to find that trick rather more difficult to pull within the necessarily limited confines of a drama than in the broader, more liberating expanses of a novel. Indeed, *Strangers Meeting*, though no more than the fortuitous by-product of a failed theatrical experiment, stands its ground, circa 80 years post publication, as a modestly accomplished if somewhat derivative work of fiction. The protracted emergence then apparent dismissal from mind of WG's third and last play suggest on its author's part both an enduring desire to master the medium and a final acceptance of his inability (despite one very early success) to find satisfaction there.

Perhaps ultimately he was too much of a perfectionist for his own good. He concludes *Memoirs*, his personal valediction, with lines – that "sum up something of my philosophy," he says – which clear-sightedly acknowledge the snare such a mindset lays. The lines, he notes, were written "a few years ago, after reading through a novel I had just finished." And yet, if you read *Strangers Meeting*, reworked from his second play and published in 1939, a full 64 years before *Memoirs* appeared, you'll find, courtesy of the pen of "Peter Crane", short-winded twentysomething poet and WG *alter ego*, the selfsame words:

Perfection is a full stop.

Mark this the comma of imperfect striving ...⁷

So the writer, this "private man", this "novelist and playwright", mines, reimagines, obscures his past, his self, his story to the end.⁸ No matter. As for the plays, though you may live your life through with no chance to enjoy even one on the stage, where two at least belong, return instead to the welcoming embrace of his books to reaffirm yet again that, while the intriguing promise of his epitaph's third word may prove illusory, that of its first, happily, does not.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ Though none of the three plays have been published *in English*, German theatrical agent and publisher VVB in Norderstedt and reference libraries in Hamburg, Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Erlangen and Kiel all hold copies of the WG / Nybo collaboration *Indizienbeweis* (VVB, undated, c1980).

² *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003

³ Ted Harrison interview with WG, 22 December 1977 (BBC Archive / British Library)

⁴ *The Cornishman*, 2 April 1936; other quotes from *Memoirs*

⁵ The Graham Archive is held by the Courtney Library of the Royal Cornwall Museum, the Royal Institution of Cornwall, River Street, Truro, TR1 2SJ

⁶ RIC archive, author's notebook

⁷ *Strangers Meeting*, Ward Lock, 1939, Book Two, Chapter XIV

⁸ And beyond, for his epitaph, though terse and apparently guileless, is problematic. After hitting his writing stride towards the end of WWII, WG penned just one now forgotten play in his remaining sixty years, so "PLAYWRIGHT", while not wrong, is a stretch. Even if you count *Indizienbeweis*, he published more poems in his lifetime than plays, so why not "POET" too? He wrote more screenplays (produced and unproduced) than stage plays, so why not "SCREENWRITER"? Even "NOVELIST" – and he was surely that – allows *The Japanese Girl*, *The Spanish Armadas*, *Poldark's Cornwall* and *Memoirs* (because not novels) to fall through the cracks. Simple, unpretentious AUTHOR says it best.

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